

Patriotic symbol clear as a bell

Paul Revere also once rode here

By Gordon B. Seavey
Staff Correspondent

April 18, 1775 is the exact date 215 years ago that Paul Revere, that great early patriot, took off on his historic ride to Lexington and Concord to warn the colonists that "the British were coming." Travelling by horseback, he and William Dawes made it to Lexington on that famous ride in the dark hours of the night, but enroute to Concord, the British waylaid the couriers and Paul was captured.

Every school boy and girl knows this bit of history, learning from an early age. But do Westford girls and boys know that Paul made it to Westford later to have some dealings with Westford Academy?

Son at Academy

Like all proud parents, Paul Revere wished to have his son John prepared for Harvard College. College preparatory schools were very limited, with Phillips Andover leading the way in 1778 in Massachusetts. With a strong push from Zaccheus Wright and some others, Westford Academy was organized as the second academy in the Commonwealth.

The first four preceptors of the Academy were Harvard educated so when John Revere was ready in 1799, the school apparently had a good reputation. The current preceptor was John Abbot, by then a well-known name in local educational circles.

It is also believed that Rev. Caleb Blake, local pastor for 34 years, was also an influence on the decision. Both were well-educated for the period and graduates of Harvard.

There is little doubt that Paul Revere visited Westford, to see the school and to also visit his son while in town. Inasmuch as the ride from Boston on horseback or by chaise would consume most of the daylight hours, at night he probably was received warmly by gracious and generous hosts.

If this is true, and there seems to be little doubt, it surpasses any claim that George Washington ever came to town, or that the Vikings or Sir Henry Sinclair ever stepped on an outcropping of rock on upper Depot Street as some imaginative minds have thought in the past.

Young Revere did not follow his father's business and upon graduation from Harvard in 1807, he opened a physician's office on Hunover Street, Boston.

Academy records indicate that after receiving an A.M. at Harvard, he left for New York to be a professor of theory and practice at New York

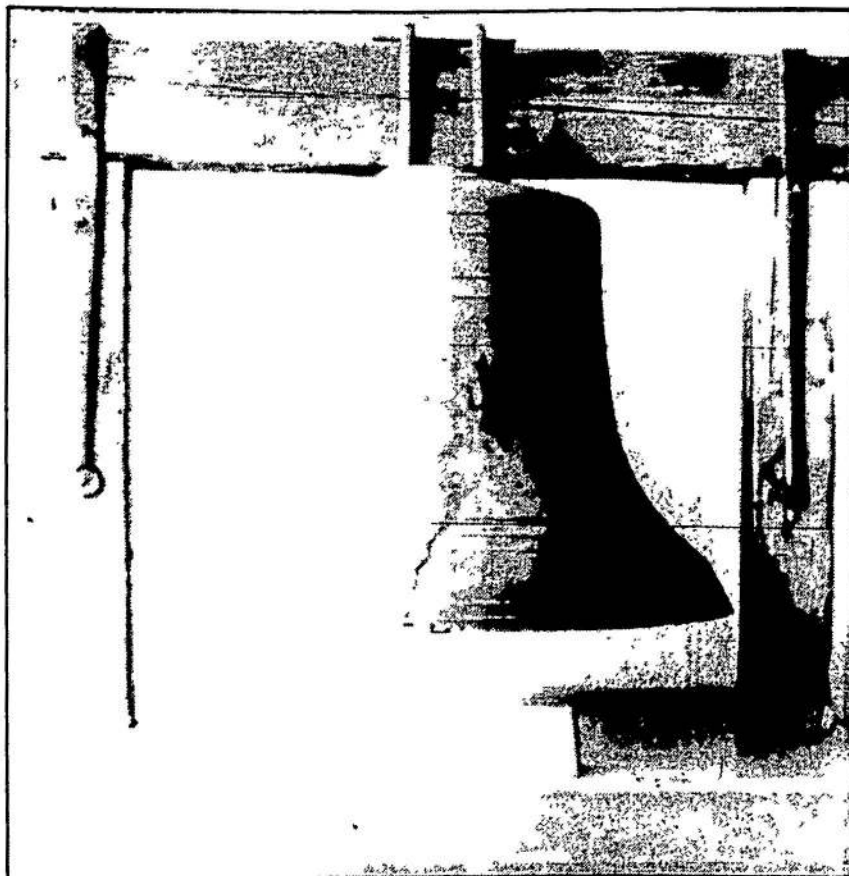


Photo courtesy Gordon Seavey

The fourth Revere Bell dating to 1809 now is displayed in the foyer of the fourth Westford Academy building on Patten Road. It was commissioned from Paul Revere at a cost of \$63.50.

University. He died in 1847.

Life in metal works

Paul Revere was born on New Year's Day 1735, the son of a silversmith, a trade he was later to follow and for which he is best known.

Came the Revolution, he then cast cannon in bronze as well as bullets. Later he turned to making church bells. What is little known is that the fourth and fifth bells he made came to Westford.

Bell No. 4 was for the third meeting house being built to replace the second edifice, which in 1771 had been completely destroyed by fire. Only the handmade spike and nails had been salvaged.

From a ledger sheet in impeccable handwriting comes this "Memorandum of Bells cast by me, Paul Revere," a copy of which is in the archives of the First Parish Church, United. Under the date of 1773 it shows that Bell No. 4 was sold to the Town of Westford and its weight was 675 lbs. Inasmuch as the First Parish Church and the town were one unit at the time explains why the town purchased it.

Astonishingly, Bell No. 5 came to Westford, also. Quality reigned supreme! This one, weighing but 120 lbs., was destined for the original Academy building, under construction at about the same time. Bells were sold by the weight, the heavier the bell the greater the cost. The Academy was located at the head or west end of the Common, diagonally opposite the church site.

As the financial drain of the Revolution slowly subsided, Westford people were encouraged to improve their own lot by erecting a larger meeting house to replace one destroyed by fire. Also, the pressure was on to launch a private secondary school, one of the earliest in the Commonwealth, with a two-story edifice which now houses the Westford Museum.

It probably was a field day for the elders and children to watch two large buildings being erected at one time. The artisans and many of the laborers came from outside, and it was an opportunity for local farmers to give a hand. They worked long hours with simple tools and equipment and a scarcity of materials. Old records indicate that many workers boarded locally. Feed was provided for their horses and a barrel of rum was always ready to be tapped.

Original bell missing

What happened to the Revere Bell? Rev. George E. Downey, pastor of the church and an ardent collector of old records and scattered information concerning the meeting house, says that when the 120-foot steeple of the building was repaired and "shored up" in 1831, it was thought to be a good time to have a larger and more impressive bell, at least for vanity's sake.

Therefore, the Revere Bell was either sold or turned into the Holcumb Foundry in East Medfield for a 1200-pounder. That foundry was a successor to Revere. The present bell, again larger and 300 lbs. heavier, was installed in 1856. It is still there.

Revere's fifth bell was for the cupola of the new Academy building, and probably as finances were limited, wound up being one-fifth the size of its "brother" at the church. Its fate is probably the same as its larger mate.

A scrap of paper dated Feb. 22, 1809, shows that John Abbot (no longer preceptor) Bot of Paul Revere & Sons one Academy Bell, Wt 127 1/2 / 50 a hundred \$63.50. Apparently the old bell cracked as it was turned in at 25 cents per pound. Abbot paid

cash, \$36 for the difference. This statement was reproduced in June Kennedy's "Westford Recollections, 1729-1975."

In his first year of production, 1793, Revere cast seven bells. His very first weighed 912 lbs. and was for "Doctor Lathrop Society," the second to the Town of Amherst, weight 638 lbs., then the third, a 50-pounder for Captain Dane's ship. The fourth and fifth came to Westford, and the final for the year went to a church in Hallowell, Maine, a small one weighing but 160 lbs.

Who cared about saving Revere Bells two centuries or less ago? Very few.

Today they are famous. Edward and Evelyn Stickney of Bedford (a sister town to Westford) are among historians who care very much about Revere and his bells. They have located 137 of his castings to date. All but 11 are in New England, with 58 — nearly half — in this Commonwealth. New Hampshire has 29, Maine 25, Vermont 11, Rhode Island has two and Connecticut has one.

Role in community

Although a costly acquisition in the early days, bells were installed not only to call the community to worship or school, but as an alarm system which would warn of an approaching Indian raid, tell of a death with its tolling or a calamity such as a fire — or call the men to the meeting house to discuss town business.

One by one in Westford the bells from church, school and mill mainly have disappeared. They used to tell us when to get up, go to work or church or blow the lights out at night. Tennyson wrote "Twilight and evening bell, and after that the dark."

From high up in the tower of the old meeting house all through the day and night, the sweet melodious sound of the striking hour rings over the Common. On still days and evenings, the bell may be heard in the valleys below.

The belfry of the old meeting house was used to install the "town clock," a gift of John Abbot in 1837. A clapper was set below the rim of the bell, and when the brass works of the Willard clock in a room below the belfry called for striking the hour, it would set in motion this clapper, which struck the rim of the bell creating a monstrous sound.

The clock was operated like a grandfather's clock, with weights dropping down the interior of the steeple. The sexton of the church climbed up to the clock room each week to wind back the weights. This was no easy task.

Long after the organ was "electrified" in 1931, the old clockworks were replaced by modern power. And long gone is the organ blow boy or "pumper" and the scary climb up the tower to wind the "town" clock.

Paul Revere aroused the folks at Lexington and Concord by his ride over two centuries ago. Many generations later, through his bells one hears not the clatter of horses' hoofs but the mellow tones from those early bells brought to Westford.

Gordon Seavey, a native of Westford, recalls that a standard procedure was to ring lustily the church bells at midnight on the Fourth of July. He tolled the church bell on the deaths of President Franklin Roosevelt and for Abel Abbot in 1921, a direct descendant of the donor of the town bell.